# COLORADO'S WINNABLE BATTLES ELEVATING HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

# Safe Food

Each year, one in six Americans (or 48 million people) get sick from, and 3,000 people die from, foodborne diseases. Reducing foodborne illness by just 10 percent would prevent 5 million Americans from getting sick each year. Preventing a single fatal case of *E. coli O157* infection would save an estimated \$7 million dollars.





# Why is this important?

- Foodborne illnesses cost the United States \$152 billion per year, an average cost of \$1,850 each time someone gets sick from food according to the *Center for Science in the Public Interest*.
- Currently 43 percent of the money Americans spend on food is for food prepared away from home.
- Each year, Colorado retail food establishments have to dispose of food valued at more than \$30,000 due to unsanitary conditions.
- The state's economy and the health of the public benefit from a safe and successful food industry.

### Where are we?

- On average, over a three-year period, 14.3 percent of retail food inspections have three or more foodborne illness violations cited during an inspection.
- On average, 10 percent of the retail food inspections conducted result in the disposal of food.

### Where do we want to be?

### By 2016,

- decrease the occurrence of three or more foodborne illness violations in Colorado restaurants by 5 percent;
- decrease the percent of inspections resulting in food being thrown out due to unsanitary conditions by
   2.5 percent.

While reducing the occurrence of foodborne illness is the goal, the violation measures mentioned above are more reliable than simply determining the success by decreasing the incidence of foodborne illness. Tracking the number of foodborne illnesses is essential, but can be easily influenced if people do not report their illness or if there is a large outbreak.

## What is being done?

- State and local public health agencies along with key partners provide
  - alerts to outbreaks and contaminated food;
  - o inspections and regulatory enforcement programs;
  - o food handler training for restaurants and other food service providers;
  - education for consumers on general food safety;
  - o education on hazards associated with certain foods for industry and agriculture.
- At the state level, we also work to
  - increase and improve utilization of the resources listed above to ensure comprehensive food safety programs are in place;
  - develop innovative strategies and approaches to replace or improve traditional retail food inspections and associated measures;
  - collaborate with national and state food safety groups.
- At the national level,
  - o new federal food safety laws and regulations are being implemented over the next 5 years.
- For consumers,
  - o keep informed about food hazards, contaminated foods and outbreaks;
  - prepare and store food properly;
  - o use a thermometer to make sure cooked foods reach the correct temperature; and
  - wash their hands often.

# **High-risk groups**

Anyone can develop a foodborne illness, but older adults, pregnant women, newborns and people with certain conditions are at greater risk, and should be careful about the foods they eat and should avoid raw and undercooked animal products, meats, poultry, eggs, fish, unpasteurized dairy and juices and unwashed produce.

# **Underlying causes**

Global economic and social changes are transforming our food systems at an unprecedented rate, allowing for the availability of diverse foods throughout the year. However, food production, processing and delivery; moving to large-scale agriculture; storage; transportation; and marketing technologies have increased the potential of contaminated foods spreading beyond the local community. Consumers have increasingly shifted from home-prepared meals to pre-prepared or ready-to-eat meals, often consumed away from home.

In addition to the hurdles created by the globalization of the food systems, other underlying causes of foodborne illness include maintaining the commitment of industry to food safety, when industry's financial bottom line often is the first priority. At the same time, regulatory agencies and inspectors are being hampered by dwindling resources. Policy and lawmakers are concerned about increasing government oversight and often lack knowledge regarding the importance of food safety and its impact on public health.